

## Avoiding Stigma by Association: Subtle Prejudice Against Lesbians in the Form of Social Distancing

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We explored subtle prejudice against lesbians by examining heterosexual women's tendency to distance themselves socially from lesbians. People can distance themselves socially by expressing beliefs that are dissimilar to another person's beliefs, regardless of whether they agree with the other person. We used a conformity paradigm, in which the majority was perceived to be heterosexual, and a dissenter was represented as either lesbian or heterosexual, to investigate social distancing. The majority expressed unpopular personal preferences (e.g., preference for different types of musical instruments), gave sexist responses, and did not identify as feminist; the dissenter did the opposite. The sexual orientation of the dissenter affected high-prejudiced participants' expression of personal preferences and both high- and low-prejudiced participants' expression of modern sexist beliefs and self-identification as feminist. The consequence was that participants said more sexist remarks and were less likely to identify as feminist when the dissenter was a lesbian. We discuss results in terms of prejudice and fear of association with the lesbian.

Prejudice against gays and lesbians is openly demonstrated, for instance, in legislative efforts to prevent legal recognition of homosexual marriages (Defense of Marriage Act, 1996) and in verbal and physical attacks against lesbians and gays (D'Augelli, 1992; Herek, 1994, 1998). Importantly, however, more subtle or covert forms of prejudice against lesbians or gays may also occur. Our study examined one behavioral manifestation of covert prejudice against lesbians—that of *social distancing*. Beyond the implication of social distancing for prejudice against lesbians, we were also interested in the ramifications of social distancing on heterosexual women's willingness to express feminist-related beliefs and to self-identify as feminist.

Social distancing, differentiating oneself socially from another person or group, can occur by expressing attitudes or beliefs dissimilar to another person's attitudes. Results from Cooper and Jones's (1969) study support the hypothesis that people alter self-presentation of opinions to avoid an association with disliked others. In their study, participants altered their opinions on an attitude questionnaire to avoid being miscast with a disliked person who was otherwise similar to the participants. In the same manner, people may differentiate themselves from lesbians by altering the expressions of

their opinions, particularly if they hold negative attitudes about lesbians.

Boyanowsky and Allen (1973) demonstrated the impact of prejudice on people's willingness to express self-relevant attitudes. They asked participants to express publicly their opinion after they heard either a majority or unanimity express an unpopular opinion. Although dissenters to the majority opinion typically decrease conformity, Boyanowsky and Allen demonstrated that the ethnicity of a dissenter affected the ability of the dissenter to decrease conformity pressure on a prejudiced individual. Specifically, a European American dissenter was more effective at reducing conformity than an African American dissenter among prejudiced European American participants. Boyanowsky (1970, as cited by Allen, 1975) argued that self-presentation concerns were a reason for these results. He demonstrated that participants avoided expressing beliefs similar to an African American person more so than a European American person when under surveillance by European American group members, even when these other European American group members had not stated their opinions. By failing to align oneself with outgroup members, "a person under surveillance by recognizable ingroup members is able to maintain a 'safe' social distance and thereby avoid being identified too closely with an out-group member" (Allen, 1975, pp. 36–37).

Social distancing from lesbians may be a direct result of prejudice or a result of social pressures to avoid association

with stigmatized groups. People may wish to distance themselves from lesbians to avoid obtaining a “courtesy stigma” (Goffman, 1963). That is, they may wish to avoid being stigmatized themselves because of an association with stigmatized individuals. Sigelman, Howell, Cornell, Cutright, and Dewey (1991) demonstrated the power of courtesy stigma on people’s perceptions of men who were associated with gay men. They found that prejudiced people were likely to assume that a man who voluntarily associated with a gay man had homosexual tendencies and possessed traits associated with gay men. Similarly, Neuberg, Smith, Hoffman, and Russel (1994) found that men reported less anticipated comfort in a social interaction with a heterosexual man after they had watched a videotape of this man interacting with a gay friend. These studies demonstrated that people make assumptions about people who associate with gays. Knowing that people make these assumptions could cause people to avoid the association in the first place.

In this study, we examined women’s tendency to distance themselves socially from lesbians in a conceptual replication of Boyanowsky and Allen’s (1973) study. More specifically, we examined the impact of sexual orientation of a female dissenter on heterosexual women’s answers to three types of questions. The first involved personal preferences such as those for various musical instruments or type of academic examinations. The second involved sexist beliefs. The last question asked whether participants considered themselves to be feminist. The majority of the confederate group members expressed unpopular preferences, gave sexist responses, and did not identify themselves as feminist; the dissenter did the opposite.

We included the personal preference questions to replicate Boyanowsky and Allen’s (1973) findings using a lesbian rather than an African American dissenter. Boyanowsky and Allen argued and demonstrated that the ethnicity of the dissenter affected beliefs that could be personally associated with the participant but not general beliefs that did not reference the self. They argued that the ethnicity of the dissenter would affect beliefs associated with the self because European American participants would most likely to see themselves as different from African Americans on these personal questions.

We included the questions about sexism and feminist identification because we wanted to test whether the impact of the sexual orientation of a dissenter on expression of beliefs would also impact public endorsement of feminist-related beliefs. We were particularly interested in public responses to these questions because of the association between feminism and lesbianism. This association may heighten concerns about being aligned with a lesbian. Lesbianism has been argued to be the most effective way of freeing oneself from traditional gender roles and male domination and of forming solidarity with women rather than men. As Abbott and Love (1971) stated:

A vital relationship between lesbians and women’s liberation is in their mutual interest in a time of changing relationships. Lesbians are the women who potentially can demonstrate life outside the male power structure that dominates marriage as well as every other aspect of our culture. Thus, the lesbian movement is not only related to women’s liberation, it is at the very heart of it. The attitude toward lesbians is an indicator by which to measure the extent of women’s actual liberation. (p. 450)

Consistent with the argument that lesbianism and feminism should be associated, we have found evidence for a perceived association between being a lesbian and being a feminist. We had students in an introductory psychology class in a mass screening estimate the percentage of feminists who were lesbian and the percentage of women who were lesbians. Women and men estimated that there were about twice as many feminists who were lesbians than there were women who were lesbians; female participants:  $M = 30.20\%$ ,  $SD = 20.61$  vs.  $M = 17.82\%$ ,  $SD = 11.63$ ,  $t(907) = 17.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ; male participants:  $M = 30.14\%$ ,  $SD = 22.95$  vs.  $M = 12.95\%$ ,  $SD = 11.04$ ,  $t(479) = 16.64$ ,  $p < .001$ , comparing percentage of feminists who are lesbians and percentage of women who are lesbians, respectively.

Researchers have argued that the stigma associated with being lesbian is a source of social pressure, discouraging women (especially heterosexual women) from breaking traditional gender roles, endorsing feminist-related beliefs, and self-identifying as feminist (Abbott & Love, 1971; Garnets, 1996). Researchers also argue that the fear of being labeled *lesbian* or *gay* is a basis of gender-role socialization (Burns, 1996; Garnets, 1996). As Gloria Steinem (1978) stated:

Sooner or later, all nonconforming women are likely to be labeled lesbians. True, we start out with the smaller punishments of being called “pushy” or “aggressive,” “man-hating” or “unfeminine.” But it’s only a small step from those adjectives, whether bestowed by men or other women, to the full-fledged epithet of “lesbian.” (p. 267)

In addition to nonconformity to gender roles, people may perceive as risky the explicit endorsement of feminist-related beliefs because of this connection between lesbianism and feminism and the stigma associated with being lesbian. As Garnets (1996) notes, women may avoid mentioning their membership in a feminist organization, fail to confront heterosexist remarks, or avoid or conceal friendships with lesbians because of a fear of being labeled a *lesbian*.

We are aware of only one published study that tests the connection between perceiving feminists as lesbians and one’s own expression of feminist-related beliefs. Cowen, Mestlin, and Masek (1992) found that people who were less likely to identify as feminist were more likely to agree with stereotypes about feminists. One of the characteristics included in their scale measuring stereotypes was a rating of whether feminists were homosexual or hetero-

sexual.<sup>1</sup> In our study we experimentally examined whether responses that would explicitly provide a connection between a particular heterosexual woman and a lesbian would affect the heterosexual woman's willingness to express sexist beliefs and to self-identify as a feminist.

In sum, we predicted that:

1. A lesbian dissenter would be less effective than a heterosexual dissenter at decreasing conformity pressures as evidenced by the percentage of responses that were the same as the majority.
2. Heterosexual women would be more likely to socially distance from a lesbian than from a heterosexual dissenter as evidenced by their willingness to give the same response as the dissenter.
3. These two tendencies would result in women's average responses conveying more sexist beliefs and less self-identification as feminist when in the presence of a lesbian than a heterosexual dissenter.
4. These effects for the dissenter's sexual orientation would be moderated by participants' level of prejudice against homosexuals.

## METHOD

### Participants

We recruited 79 women, primarily European American, from a larger pool of participants who completed a mass screening questionnaire in their introductory psychology classes. Only participants who strongly disagreed, on a 7-point scale, with a statement on the mass screening saying that they considered themselves to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual were recruited. Three of the 79 women who participated in the study were excluded because they admitted suspicion about the cover story during the debriefing.

### Design

Prejudice level and dissent condition (lesbian vs. heterosexual) were the two independent variables in this study. Prejudice level was assessed in a pretest. We randomly assigned participants to the two dissenting conditions. Results were analyzed with regressions.

### Procedure

**Pretest measures.** The mass screening questionnaire consisted of Kite and Deaux's (1986) Attitudes To-

ward Homosexuality Scale; the Modern Sexism Scale (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995; Swim & Cohen, 1997); a feminist identification question used during the experimental portion of the study; a question asking participants if they considered themselves to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual; and several other scales included for unrelated studies. Higher numbers on the pretest measures indicated more prejudice against homosexuals, more sexist responses, and greater self-identification as feminist. The pretest Attitude Toward Homosexuality Scale and the Modern Sexism Scale were reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .93$  and  $.72$ , respectively). The experimenter and confederates were unaware of participants' pretest responses during the experimental session.

**Experimental session.** A male experimenter told participants to sit in an assigned seat in a row of chairs. The order of the seating, was a female confederate, a male confederate, a female confederate, the fourth female confederate (either lesbian identified or not), and the participant. The male confederate was included to make the study appear less staged. Participants were told that the study was to assess college students' attitudes about political and social topics. They answered questions projected on a screen and read aloud by the experimenter. Participants responded out loud in the group, in the order of their seating, with the participant responding after all the confederates had responded. They answered multiple-choice questions about their personal preferences in many different areas, followed by questions from the Modern Sexism Scale. Last, they indicated whether they considered themselves to be feminists.

The dissenter's sexual orientation was communicated on the second personal preference question. Participants were asked, "Where would you go for a romantic evening with a member of the opposite sex?" In response, the lesbian dissenter replied, "I wouldn't go out for a romantic evening with a man because I'm a lesbian. Do you still want me to answer the question?" In response to the experimenter asking her to pick which of the four options she would prefer she said, "Okay. If it were a romantic evening with a woman, I'd pick c." In contrast, the heterosexual dissenter said in response to the same question, "I haven't had time to go out for romantic evenings with anyone. Do you still want me to answer the question?" and "Okay. If I had time, I would pick c." The participants then proceeded through the rest of the survey questions in the group.

Next participants completed a final questionnaire in private. The confederates were escorted to other rooms allegedly to complete the same questionnaire. After completing the questionnaire, we assessed participants' suspicions and revealed the reason for the study. They were dismissed after the experimenter was assured from the debriefing that they felt comfortable with their participation in the study.

<sup>1</sup> Cowen et al. (1992) did not report correlations between self-identification as a feminist and individual items on the scale, so it is difficult to know the extent to which self-identification is related to the perception of feminists' sexual orientation.

## Dependent Measures

**Personal preference questions.** The first set of questions consisted of eight multiple-choice personal preference questions (e.g., “My ideal test would be: [a] essay, [b] multiple choice, [c] short answer, [d] oral presentation, or [e] true/false.”). The questions were pretested with women ( $N = 137$ ) from a psychology class to determine the most popular responses. With the exception of the first two questions in this set, all confederates (except the dissenter) unanimously gave the same unpopular response to each question. The dissenting confederate gave the most popular response to each question.

**Sexism and feminist identification.** The first three sexist questions were taken from Swim et al.’s (1995) Old-Fashioned Sexism Scale (e.g., “It is more important to encourage boys than to encourage girls to participate in athletics.”). All confederates gave different nonsexist responses on these first three questions. We manipulated conformity pressure on the next eight sexism questions taken from the Modern Sexism Scale (Swim et al., 1995) by having the first three confederates give the same sexist response to each question. The dissenter gave a nonsexist response. Participants indicated their agreement, on a 7-point scale, to all eight questions (e.g., “Discrimination against women is no longer a problem.”) Finally, they indicated their agreement, on a 7-point scale, to the statement “I consider myself to be a feminist.” Participants’ responses to the eight sexism questions formed a reliable scale (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .83$ ). The mean response to the sexism items for the conforming confederates was 5.5, and the mean response to these items for the dissenting confederate was 2.5. In response to the question about whether they were feminist, the conforming confederates gave a response of 6 (indicating disagreement) and the dissenter gave a response of 2 (indicating agreement). We coded participant responses so that higher numbers indicated more sexist responses and being more likely to self-identify as feminist.

**Construction of dependent measures.** Within each type of question (personal preference, sexism, and feminist identification), we computed conformity, independent, and social distancing percentages for each participant. We calculated the conformity percentage by dividing the number of answers that were identical to the majority of the group by the total number of answers. We calculated the independent percentage by dividing the number of answers that were identical to neither the majority nor the dissenting confederate by the total number of answers. We calculated the social distancing percentage by dividing the total number of answers that were different from the dissenting confederate (that is either the same as the majority or an independent response) by the total number of answers. In addition to the three types of percentages, we calculated the mean responses to the sexism and feminist identification questions.

## Final Questionnaire

We asked participants to complete a final written questionnaire about their participation in the study. Participants rated whether they agreed with each confederate’s opinions (from 1, *strongly agree*, to 7, *strongly disagree*), perceived each confederate to be similar to themselves (from 1, *very similar*, to 7, *very dissimilar*), and thought they could be friends with each confederate (from 1, *very likely friends*, to 7, *not very likely friends*). We also asked participants to indicate their best guess whether each confederate belonged to several social categories including being heterosexual or homosexual. We told participants that we were interested in their best guess to categories that cannot be readily evident from appearances and to give their best guess even if they were unsure. We used participants’ responses to the similarity and friendship ratings of the dissenting confederate and whether they identified her as homosexual as manipulation checks. We used agreement with the dissenting confederate and with the other confederates as two additional dependent variables.

## RESULTS

### Manipulation Check

In the lesbian dissent condition, all participants indicated that the dissenter was lesbian. In the heterosexual dissent condition, 38 participants reported that the dissenter was heterosexual and 3 participants indicated that the dissenter was lesbian. The results reported below include these three participants. Excluding these three participants does not substantively alter the results. All of the nondissenting confederates were identified as heterosexual in both conditions.

To examine whether participants perceived the lesbian and heterosexual dissenter differently, we first regressed participants’ private ratings of the dissenter onto the dissenter’s sexual orientation (lesbian vs. heterosexual) and participants’ prejudice levels and then added the interaction between these two variables into the equation. Participants in the lesbian dissent condition ( $M = 4.17$ ) perceived themselves as significantly more dissimilar from the dissenter than participants in the heterosexual dissent condition ( $M = 3.03$ ),  $\beta = .31$ ,  $t(72) = 2.91$ ,  $p = .005$ . Overall, participants did not differ in their reports of how much they wanted to be friends with the dissenter. High-prejudiced participants were more likely than low-prejudiced participants to report that they were dissimilar from the lesbian dissenter,  $\beta = .28$ ,  $t(72) = 2.66$ ,  $p = .01$ , and that they were less willing to be friends with the lesbian dissenter,  $\beta = .26$ ,  $t(72) = 2.35$ ,  $p = .02$ . No significant interactions emerged.

### Verbal Responses to Questions

We used regressions to analyze the different type of verbal responses to each type of question. The dependent variables

were the conformity, social distancing, and independent percentages for each of the three types of questions asked during the study as well as the mean responses to the sexism and feminist identification questions. The conformity percentages allowed us to test whether the lesbian and the heterosexual dissenter were equally effective at decreasing conformity pressures. The social distancing percentage allowed us to test the extent to which participants avoided an association with the lesbian versus the heterosexual dissenter. The independent percentages allowed us to test whether participants opted to give a unique response that had not been expressed by either the majority or the dissenting confederate. The mean responses to the sexism and feminist identification questions allowed us to examine whether the sexual orientation of the dissenter affected the nature of women's responses.

Within these regressions, we entered the main effects for the dissenter's sexual orientation (lesbian vs. heterosexual) and participant prejudice level followed by the interaction between these two variables. For the sexism and feminist identification dependent variables, we entered the respective pretest scores prior to the main effects and interactions to covary out their effects. When the main effect for dissenter's sexual orientation was significant or the interaction between dissenter's sexual orientation and prejudice levels was significant the mean responses to the dependent variables are reported, broken down by the dissenter's sexual orientation and a median split on the Kite and Deaux (1986) prejudice scale. Furthermore, we adjusted the means presented for pretest scores for the sexism and feminist identification measures.<sup>2</sup>

**Personal preferences.** We found a significant main effect for the dissenter's sexual orientation on participants' tendency to conform with the group majority,  $\beta = .56$ ,  $t(71) = 1.98$ ,  $p = .05$ . This effect is qualified by an interaction with prejudice levels,  $\beta = -.78$ ,  $t(71) = -2.74$ ,  $p = .01$ . The pattern

of means indicates that high-prejudiced participants demonstrated more conformity with the majority when the dissenter was lesbian ( $M = 25\%$ ) than when the dissenter was heterosexual ( $M = 10\%$ ), and we found little difference for low-prejudiced participants ( $M_s = 16$  and  $19\%$ , respectively). We also found a significant interaction for social distancing,  $\beta = .61$ ,  $t(71) = -2.14$ ,  $p = .04$ , with high-prejudiced participants demonstrating more social distancing from the dissenter when she was lesbian ( $M = 61\%$ ) than when she was heterosexual ( $M = 49\%$ ) and little difference for low-prejudiced participants ( $M_s = 63$  and  $61\%$ , respectively).

**Sexism questions.** The only effect on the dependent variable measuring conformity with the majority for the sexism questions was for prejudice with high-prejudiced participants conforming more than low-prejudiced participants,  $\beta = .29$ ,  $t(71) = 2.48$ ,  $p = .01$ . Furthermore, we found no interactions for the dissenter's sexual orientation and prejudice level for any of the dependent variables calculated from responses to the sexism questions. However, we did find significant main effects for the dissenter's sexual orientation for the percentage of time participants distanced themselves socially from the dissenter and gave independent responses,  $\beta = .26$ ,  $t(71) = 2.36$ ,  $p = .01$ ;  $\beta = -.27$ ,  $t(71) = 2.32$ ,  $p = .01$ . Both high- and low-prejudiced participants socially distanced more from the lesbian dissenter ( $M = 75\%$ ) than the heterosexual dissenter ( $M = 66\%$ ) and were more likely to give an independent response with a lesbian ( $M = 65\%$ ) than a heterosexual dissenter ( $M = 55\%$ ). The result of these choices on the nature of women's responses is revealed through their tendency to give more sexist responses when in the presence of a lesbian ( $M = 3.83$ ) than a heterosexual dissenter ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $\beta = -.25$ ),  $t(71) = -2.43$ ,  $p = .02$ .

**Feminist identification.** As with the sexism questions, a main effect (with no qualifying interactions) for social distancing on the feminist identification question suggested that both high- and low-prejudiced participants socially distanced from the lesbian dissenter ( $M = 97\%$ ) more than the heterosexual dissenter ( $M = 82\%$ ,  $\beta = .24$ ),  $t(71) = 2.17$ ,  $p = .03$ . Unlike the sexism questions, there were interactions between the dissenter's sexual orientation and prejudice level for the conformity,  $\beta = -.66$ ,  $t(71) = -2.38$ ,  $p = .02$ , and independent percentages,  $\beta = .72$ ,  $t(71) = 2.48$ ,  $p = .01$ , on the feminist identification question. These interactions revealed that high- and low-prejudiced participants distanced in different ways. The pattern of means indicate that high-prejudiced participants preferred to socially distance by conforming with the majority, and low-prejudiced participants preferred to socially distance by giving independent responses. Specifically, high-prejudiced participants were more likely to conform

<sup>2</sup>We also analyzed the sexism and feminist identification questions with repeated measures analyses to test for changes between the pretest responses and those reported during the lab study and whether the dissenter's sexual orientation and prejudice level moderated these effects. The results for the sexism measures indicated that high-prejudice participants were more likely to give sexist response during the lab study than in the pretest, and they were more likely to give more sexist responses in the lesbian dissent condition than in the heterosexual dissent condition. We found no interactions suggesting that participants in the lesbian dissent condition were likely to give more sexist responses in the pretest as well as during the lab study. However, as revealed in the text, the covariate analyses that adjust for this difference suggest that the dissenter had an effect on these responses; further, the size of the difference between the pretest and the lab study was stronger in the lesbian than the heterosexual dissent conditions ( $d_s = .80$  and  $.43$ , respectively). Results for the feminist identification question revealed an interaction between the dissenter's sexual orientation and when the measures were assessed. Participants were less likely to identify as a feminist during the lab study than in the pretest when in the lesbian dissent condition whereas we found no difference between the lab study and pretest responses for participants in the heterosexual dissent condition.

with the majority in the lesbian dissent condition ( $M = 50\%$ ) than in the heterosexual dissent condition ( $M = 21\%$ ), whereas we found little difference in low-prejudiced participants' tendency to conform ( $M_s = 22$  and  $19\%$ ). In contrast, we found low-prejudiced participants more likely to give an independent response in the lesbian dissent condition ( $M = 72\%$ ) than in the heterosexual dissent condition ( $M = 50\%$ ) and high-prejudiced participants did the reverse by giving fewer independent responses in the lesbian dissent condition ( $M = 50\%$ ) than in the heterosexual dissent condition ( $M = 68\%$ ). The mean feminist identification scores reveal that for both high- and low-prejudiced participants, the outcome was the same: both were less likely to identify themselves as feminist when the lesbian dissenter identified as feminist ( $M = 3.28$ ) than when the heterosexual dissenter identified as feminist ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $\beta = .18$ ),  $t(71) = 1.96$ ,  $p = .05$ .

### Private Agreement

We again used regressions to test first whether the main effects of dissenter's sexual orientation and participants' prejudice level predicted the extent to which participants privately reported agreeing with the confederates, and then whether the interaction between the dissenter's sexual orientation and prejudice level predicted private agreement. Participants reported being more likely to disagree with the majority when the dissenting confederate was heterosexual than when she was lesbian ( $M_s = 5.24$  and  $4.27$ , respectively,  $\beta = -.30$ ),  $t(72) = -2.80$ ,  $p = .01$ , and less likely to agree with the dissenting confederate when she was lesbian than heterosexual ( $M_s = 3.53$  and  $2.63$ , respectively,  $\beta = .29$ ),  $t(71) = 2.85$ ,  $p = .01$ ). Prejudiced participants were more likely to agree with the majority,  $\beta = -.41$ ,  $t(72) = 4.09$ ,  $p = .01$ , and disagree with the dissenting confederates,  $\beta = .27$ ,  $t(72) = 2.56$ ,  $p = .01$ . We found no interactions between the dissenter's sexual orientation and prejudice level. Interestingly, a comparison between participants' ratings of the two types of confederates in a 2 (Prejudice Level)  $\times$  2 (Dissenter's Sexual Orientation)  $\times$  2 (Rating of Majority vs. Dissenting Confederate) mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that participants disagreed more with the majority than the dissenting confederate ( $M_s = 4.76$  and  $3.09$ , respectively),  $F(1, 74) = 26.01$ ,  $p = .01$ ). The only other effect from this ANOVA was an interaction between who was rated and the dissenter's sexual orientation,  $F(1, 74) = 7.95$ ,  $p = .006$ , replicating the regression results.

## DISCUSSION

Our results indicate that both high- and low-prejudiced women socially distanced themselves from a lesbian more than from a heterosexual woman through expressing unpopular personal preferences, expressing more sexist beliefs, and being less likely to self-identify as a feminist. Specifically,

high-prejudiced participants were less likely to give the same response as the dissenting confederate when she was lesbian than when she was heterosexual. Furthermore, both high- and low-prejudiced participants were more likely to give more sexist responses and not to identify as a feminist when the dissenter was lesbian than heterosexual. The result of this avoidance was that women were more likely to say more sexist remarks and were less likely to identify as a feminist when the dissenter was lesbian than when she was heterosexual.

We also discovered meaningful differences in how low- and high-prejudiced participants responded to the questions. In contrast to high-prejudiced participants, low-prejudiced participants were unaffected by the dissenter's sexual orientation for the personal preference questions. Furthermore, although low- and high-prejudiced participants both socially distanced from the lesbian dissenter more so than the heterosexual dissenter on the feminist identification question, they socially distanced in different ways. Whereas high-prejudice participants conformed to the majority by socially distancing from the lesbian dissenter, low-prejudice participants conformed by making independent responses, which differed from all participants. Variation in women's choices about how to respond were most likely a function of (a) their degree of prejudice against lesbians, (b) their fear of being associated with a lesbian, and (c) the personal importance of the different questions asked.

The tendency to socially distance from the lesbian more so than the heterosexual dissenter is prejudicial for several reasons. First, this behavior is discriminatory in that they behaved differently in the presence of a lesbian versus a heterosexual woman. Second, the avoidance of association with the lesbian dissenter suggests and communicates a greater dislike of a lesbian than a heterosexual woman. This social distancing could have negative consequences for the person who is not supported by group members. Third, social distancing from lesbians by stating an opinion that differs from a lesbian's opinion can be considered a subtle or covert form of heterosexism. Observers, such as other group members, could attribute participants' expressed beliefs in the lesbian dissent condition to their actual beliefs or to prejudice. This attributional ambiguity may be particularly likely when a participant selects a compromise position such as an independent response in between the majority position and the dissenter position rather than conforming with either the majority or the dissenter. This is what the independent percentages and the mean responses suggest was occurring on the sexism questions for high- and low-prejudice participants and the feminist identification questions for low-prejudice participants. It is under such conditions of attributional ambiguity that modern forms of prejudice have been argued to be displayed (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). Participants' private responses, indicating that they agreed more with the dissenter than the majority but deaccentuating this difference when she was a lesbian, were also consistent with this interpretation.

The similarities and differences between high- and low-prejudiced participants suggest differences in degree of prejudice rather than the presence or absence of prejudice. Indicators that women who did not endorse the prejudicial statements on the pretest were indeed lower in prejudice is evidenced by two findings. First, low-, but not high-, prejudiced women were willing to be associated with the lesbian dissenter on the personal preference questions. Second, low-prejudiced women preferred an independent response on the sexism and feminist identification questions, and high-prejudiced women preferred to conform with the majority. An independent response suggests either a compromise position or an unwillingness to take sides. On the other hand, conforming with the majority is likely to lead to greater feelings of isolation for the dissenter than would an independent response. Yet, the tendency for low-prejudiced participants to socially distance from the lesbian dissenter more so than the heterosexual dissenter on the sexism and feminist identification questions suggest that they were also prejudiced. That is, as with the high-prejudiced participants, their responses were discriminatory, socially distancing, and could be interpreted as a form of subtle heterosexism. Furthermore, it is likely that indicating one's lack of prejudice on a questionnaire is easier than acting on these beliefs in public. Thus, women who stated less prejudiced beliefs on the pretest measure may indeed be less prejudiced but their tendency to socially distance suggest that they are not completely free from prejudice. Although the prejudice measure could identify those who are very prejudiced against lesbians, differentiating between those who will engage in subtle forms of discrimination from those who will not may be difficult. Thus, the tendency for both low- and high-prejudiced participants to socially distance from the lesbian dissenter could be interpreted as indicating that they are both prejudiced, and the differences in responses suggest that they are prejudiced to different degrees.

Interpreting the findings as indicating that participants' responses were driven by fears about the consequences of being associated with a lesbian is also possible. This is perhaps clearest for the low-prejudiced participants whose fear of association may have overridden their unprejudiced beliefs. Low-prejudiced participants may not have feared the association for the personal preference questions because the questions were presumably not likely to be perceived as diagnostic of sexual orientation. However, when the questions switched to issues raised in the Modern Sexism Scale (beliefs about discrimination against women, sympathy for women's struggles for equality) and self-identification as feminist, they may have felt the threat of association to be stronger because of the association between feminism and lesbianism. They may not have wanted the courtesy stigma (Goffman, 1963) or to be mistaken as a lesbian. Thus, although the lesbian dissenter was as able as the heterosexual dissenter to counteract the social influence processes leading to conformity on the personal-preference questions for the low-prejudiced participants, the stigma of associating with or

being mistaken as a lesbian did influence these women's responses to questions that were more likely to connect them with the lesbian dissenter.

High-prejudiced participants may have also felt the same fears of associating with a lesbian. They may have chosen to give responses that were the same as the presumably heterosexual majority on the personal-preference questions and the feminist-identification questions rather than give an independent response because the former more clearly differentiates them from the lesbian dissenter and aligns them with the majority. This fear in combination with prejudice may have motivated high-prejudiced participants to socially distance from a lesbian. Furthermore, their greater prejudice may have made the fear of association greater.

In addition to the differences between high- and low-prejudiced participants cited earlier, our finding that both groups were affected similarly by the sexual orientation of the dissenter on the sexism questions is interesting to note. Although these statements do not reflect blatant endorsement of traditional roles, they are arguably a measure of endorsement of subtle or covert sexism (Russo-Devosa & Swim, 1997; Swim & Cohen, 1997). Both high- and low-prejudiced women may have felt particularly uncomfortable about stating sexist beliefs about their own group and therefore resisted making statements as sexist as the majority of participants. Thus, the personal relevance of the question may have overcome high-prejudiced participants' unfavorable beliefs about lesbians. Yet, the fear of associating with the lesbian dissenter still managed to prevent both high- and low-prejudiced participants from aligning themselves with her and resulted in them giving more sexist responses than they would have if the dissenter had been heterosexual.

Readers should keep in mind, however, that regardless of whether the impact of the sexual orientation of the dissenter was because of prejudice or fear of association, the end result was social distancing from a lesbian. Social distancing is unfavorable discriminatory treatment and could have a negative impact on lesbians, for instance, by contributing to feelings of isolation. Social distancing also suggests an unwillingness to give up one's heterosexual privilege to support a lesbian. Finally, social distancing can have a negative impact on women in general by discouraging attempts to counteract sexist beliefs and discouraging public identification as feminist. If women hide their feminist beliefs and refrain from identifying as feminists because of prejudice against lesbians, fear of a courtesy stigma, or fear of being mistaken as lesbian, the resulting silence can distort public impressions of women's beliefs.

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